

VZCZCXRO5235
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHNN
DE RUEHHM #1021/01 2761057
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 031057Z OCT 07
FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3194
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY 2218
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 3403

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 001021

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: BAPTISTS, MENNONITES RECEIVE OFFICIAL GVN RECOGNITION

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Approximately three weeks before the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is scheduled to arrive in Vietnam, the government of Vietnam has granted national recognition to two more Protestant denominations: the Mennonite Vietnam Church and the Vietnam Baptist Convention. The GVN also announced plans to recognize three other Protestant churches in the near future. Leaders of these groups are Qbeat about the developments, but uncertain whether national recognition will help them settle long-standing disputes over GVN-confiscated properties and whether local officials will effectively implement the new change in policy in Vietnam's more problematic provinces. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On October 2, the Mennonite Vietnam Church and the Vietnam Baptist Convention held a joint ceremony in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) to receive certificates of registration for their national operations. Deputy Chief of the National Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) Nguyen Thanh Xuan, Chief of the Protestant Affairs Section Nguyen Van Thong, and representatives of the HCMC Fatherland Front and People's Committee attended the ceremony. The ceremony was well-covered by the state-run media, including a primetime four-minute report on national television.

FROM GUERILLA GROUP TO CONVENTIONAL CHURCH

¶3. (SBU) Pastor Nguyen Thong, leader of the Vietnam Baptist Convention (which has denominational ties to the U.S. Southern Baptist Church) said that he is very happy about the national recognition, which will enable his church to print religious materials and organize theological courses to train new pastors and evangelists. Thong said he hopes to open a new headquarters for his church in HCMC soon, and looks forward to organizing the Baptists' first official general conference in August next year to mark the 20th anniversary of the church's establishment in Vietnam. Pastor Thong described his church's path to recognition as the "transformation from guerilla to conventional activities" and was enthusiastic about planning this year's first Christmas celebration in a big local restaurant. In describing his collaboration with the GVN, Pastor Thong said that the Committee on Religious Activities gave him more that he'd asked for.

14. (SBU) Pastor Nguyen Quang Trung, leader of the Mennonite Vietnam Church, which registered locally March 2006, said national recognition is a positive development but noted that he would wait until his church gets its status as a fully recognized legal entity before proceeding with the printing and publication of religious material. [Note: According to the GVN legal framework on religion, a church has to wait at least one year after national recognition to organize a general conference, and another year after that to get full legal status, or status as a "legal person." End note.] Pastor Trung also mentioned that only after his church receives legal person status would he push more aggressively for the return of church properties that the GVN confiscated shortly after 1975.

MORE CHURCHES IN LINE FOR RECOGNITION

15. (SBU) Both pastors said the application process for national recognition was in line with the GVN legal framework, and that they had effective communication with the CRA throughout the process. They said the next immediate step for their churches is to complete local registration for all of their congregations. (Note: By July of this year, the Mennonite Church had registered 50 of its 112 local congregations, while the Vietnam Baptist Convention registered a smaller number of its congregations. End note.) The pastors said they also plan to expand training of clergy.

16. (SBU) Nguyen Van Thong, Chief of Protestant Affairs for the Southern National CRA office, said the GVN is also in the process of national recognition for three additional Protestant churches--the Assembly of God, the Presbyterian Church and the Vietnam Christian Inter-Fellowship. Leaders of these groups said they hope to be granted national recognition

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by the year's end.

17. (SBU) Comment: These positive developments take place three weeks prior to the visit of the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom and suggest that outside pressure is helping to speed up the recognition/registration process for churches in Vietnam. While it took the Mennonite Vietnam Church 18 months--from September 2004 to March 2006--to have their local congregation registered, it took only 60 days for the Vietnam Baptist Convention to get national recognition this year. Despite the positive trend, challenges remain in terms of local authorities' implementation of recognition and registration procedures in the provinces and resolution of long-standing disputes over church property seized by the GVN after 1975. Post will continue to closely monitor these developments. End comment.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
FAIRFAX